Indian Tells of Life in Basin Before Coming of Whites

Describes Utes as Hunting Tribe and Tells of Abundant Wildlife in This Vicinity

By FRED MART

(Editor's note: The following is an address by Mr. Mart given recently at the Wednesday evening assembly at the Uintah Indian school at Whiterocks.)

I don't know why they wanted me to talk, unless it was to see me get stage fright; but maybe I'll fool them if you will wait till I get my specs on. I thought you would be interested in hearing some of the history of my people. We belong to the Shoshonean linguistic family, but live apart in six bands; these are located as follows: Wimimuche, Capote, and Mache live in southeastern Utah and adjoining lands in Colorado. The Uintah, Uncompahgre, and White river bands live on allotted lands on the Uintah Reservation. The total number is about twenty-one hundred.

The Utes have not been a united tribe. Each of the several bands had its own head chief. There was a period, however during the life of Chief Tabby a few of the bands united and acknowledged him as leader; and under Ouray all the Utes amalgamated into a confederacy.

The bands formerly roamed throughout Colorado and Utah and as far west as the Utah and Salt Lake valleys. The great central parks of Colorado were their favorite haunts. The first treaties with Americans were made in 1849 when reservations were set aside in Utah and Colorado. In 1880 the present Uintah reservation was established.

Migrate to South Dakota

The tribe generally has been on good terms with the whites. In 1906, however, due to dissatisfaction with the government allotment system, most of the White River band and a small number of the Uintah and Uncompahgre migrated to South Dakota. Life there wasn't all they hoped to find it. Theodore Roosevelt tried to bring about peaceful relationships with their neighbors and planned to use tribal funds to purchase lands whereon to build homes. Dissatisfaction continued. Jim Nephi and I were attending school at Carlyle at the time Jim came home to act as interpreter for the group here and I went to Washington to interpret for a delegation of Ute chiefs. Henry Harris acting as peacemaker went to South Dakota and through him our people were persuaded to return without bloodshed, after being gone about three years.

How Indians Lived

I thought it might be of interest to tell the young people how the Indians lived before the white man came. Much of this was told me by John Duncan and Tecumseh. The Uintahs were a peaceful band, who as far as we can learn, always lived in this basin. They were not an agricultural people but lived happily and well upon game and native products of which the region well supplied. More or less permanent villages were at Vernal, Roosevelt, and in the vicinity of Fruitland.

Tepees were made usually of elk skin. Some homes were made of cedar boughs, leaves and bark woven together, which made a good winter home. Tanned skin of rabbit, deer and fur-bearing animals and sometimes shredded bark were the materials from which clothing was made. Men wore a shirt and leggings; the women wore ankle length dresses which were shortened in the summer. Buffalo hide made the best moccasins.

Tanning was done by using the brain of the animal. The hide was smoked to prevent its becoming

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hard when wet. This clothing was warm and comfortable.

Preparation of Meat

The Utes were a hunting tribe, so all sorts of game formed a large part of their diet. Meat was prepared in various ways, but chiefly by broiling or roasting fresh. Much was jerked by drying in the sun. Chokecherries, yucca fruit, mesquire beans, wild berries of many kinds, dried grasshoppers, grass seed, ground into flour on metates, and pinon nuts, were the main articles of food. The vegetables were the yemp, a native wild carrot, eaten fresh or stored in pits, but sometimes dried and ground. The native wild potato was also eaten.

Before the coming of the white man with guns and horses, buffalo roamed throughout the region. They were literally chased out of the country. Elk were also numerous. Especially were antelope numerous in the vicinity of Roosevelt. As winter came on these animals came out of the mountains and lived along the lower valleys and streams Antelope were especial favorites because of their being more easily killed; great numbers were killed and the meat dried, but much was prepared somewhat as sausage is now, Before warm weather came on quantities of this meat were taken to the mountains and stored for summer use.

Kill With Bow and Arrow

Various means were employed to kill game, the most common being to stalk the animal from cover and shoot him with the bow and arrow; another was to chase the animal until he was exhausted. A successful method was to construct a screen of brush and willows near the main trails and from this ambush their best hunters could shoot the game as they passed. During cold weather a fire was made in the center of this enclosure in the day time and from the coals and warmed earth the hunters could be comfortable during their night watch. Only the bucks were killed. All families shared alike in the distribution of the meat.

In the fall of the year most of the tribe would move west to the vicinity of Fruitland where there was a natural trap or corral in the canyon. Wings were built on each side of this which guided the animals in. Men and boys went out for miles each side and formed a great circle. The animals fleeing before the hunters soon found themselves entrapped.. Sometimes as many as one hundred would be caught at one time.

Beaver were plentiful along the streams. To capture them, their dams were broken to drain away the water and thus expose the beavers runway into the bank. By digging across the tunnel the dens were found and often several fat beaver were killed with clubs The meat was very palatable.

Fish Caught by Hand

Fish were so plentiful they could be caught by hand in shallow water but other means were used for supplying a village. On the downstream side of a pool a pen of rock would be built with openings between large enough to permit the escape of the small fish. Upstream a large bundle of brush and willows bound together, placed in the stream and rolled driving the fish ahead and serving at the same time as a barrier to their escape Only the large fish were used. The white man no doubt copied this practice from the Indian. Another method used by single families was the use of a trap constructed of large rock placed in a swift current forming a triangle, the point downstream, at the end of which was a lattice work of willows so woven to permit the small fish to pass through but retain the large ones Fish could be taken from these traps most any time Trips were often taken to Provo where they lived mainly on fish and rabbits

Sage hens and grouse were very numerous and had no fear of man hence could easily be killed with the bow and arrow. In the spring during the sage hen dance, hunters stalked these animals and killed great numbers of them. At that time these birds gathered on a sandy place by the thousands celebrated somewhat as did human beings.

Wood was cut by placing a sharp rock between the branches on the tree trunk and pounding it with another rock. Elk horns were then used to split the wood apart

Cedar and sage were the Indians matches Fires were made by rubbing these together until they were ignited by the friction. Sharp stones and bones served as knives.

Basketry Primitive

I won't go into the customs because Utes are quite touchy on that point. Our basketry was primitive. A pitch covered water bottle with a large body and narrow neck was the most common. Harvesting baskets and bowls were made of willows. Some rough undecorated pottery was used. They did some painting on rocks, skins, and cloth, descriptive of dances, hunting and battle also some maps. Amusements were varied and ball games have always been favorites. Gambling sticks were used in chance games. Modern card games were learned from the Mexicans and Americans and are played too much by the women, who are especially addicted to it.

The first horses that came into the country were brought by the Spanish enroute to California. Among the first to own a horse was Chief Walker. He traded Piute slaves for it. Some were so anxious to obtain these animals that they traded their own children for them to the Mexicans.

Tecumseh said, "My grandfather was named Uinta after the pine trees that grow in the Uinta mountains ,and I'm a nephew of Chief Walker, and will be 100 years old next spring. I was a boy when Brigham Young came intto the country, and I remember him and how our people talked about so many whites moving into the valleys west. The first white man to come and live in our valley was John Reid, the grandfather of our John Reid."